DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 344 213 CS 213 258

AUTHOR Darling, Gregory J.
TITLE "Who Is My Audience?": Speech-Act Theory and the Composition Classroom.
PUB DATE Mar 92
NOTE 13p.; Paper presented at the Annual Meeting of the Conference on College Composition and Communication (43rd, Cincinnati, OH, March 19-21, 1992).
PUB TYPE Speeches/Conference Papers (150)

EDRS PRICE MF01/PC01 Plus Postage.
DESCRIPTORS *Audience Awareness; *Freshman Composition; Higher Education; Letters (Correspondence); *Peer Evaluation; *Speech Acts; Teacher Role; Writing Evaluation; *Writing Improvement; Writing Strategies
IDENTIFIERS *Purpose (Composition); Speaking Writing Relationship

ABSTRACT

Students may forget that writing involves a relationship between writer and audience--a relationship foregrounded by speech-act theory. The writer should focus on what the audience is to be led to see about the subject. To be distinguished are "locution" (saying something), "illocution" (performance of an act in saying something, as in interrogation or the declaration of a verdict), and "perlocution" (the achievement of certain effects by saying something). A composition teacher may address such ideas by encouraging student writers to ask: (1) Who is my audience?; (2) What am I saying?; (3) Why am I saying it?; and (4) How am I affecting my audience, the reader? Experience in the college composition classroom illustrates that peer review and teacher comments help students grow more sensitive to the need to communicate with an audience and to anticipate its responses. Furthermore, assigning students to write letters about issues of concern to them sharpens the student writers' audience awareness. By keeping questions about the reading audience and the purposes for writing in mind, students realize the practical implications of speech act theory. (SG)

****
* Reproductions supplied by EDRS are the best that can be made *
* from the original document. *
****

Gregory J. Darling

PERMISSION TO REPRODUCE THIS MATERIAL HAS BEEN GRANTED BY
Gregory Darling
TO THE EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)

U.S. DEPARTMENT OF EDUCATION
Office of Educational Research and Improvement
EDUCATIONAL RESOURCES INFORMATION CENTER (ERIC)
[X] This document has been reproduced as received from the person or organization originating it.
[ ] Minor changes have been made to improve reproduction quality.
• Points of view or opinions stated in this document do not necessarily represent official OERI position or policy.

ED344213

"Who Is My Audience?" : Speech-Act Theory and the Composition Classroom

"But I got it all down," complains a student in response to lukewarm grading and comments by an instructor. This student has forgotten that writing involves a relationship between writer and audience--a relationship foregrounded by speech-act theory. That such a relationship pertains to the study of literature is acknowledged by Searle, Ohmann, Altieri, Pratt, et al., who have applied speech-act theory to their hermeneutic work (Abrams 241). Speech-act theory, however, has pedagogical implications for the composition classroom, as originally noted in a theoretical way by Reed Way Dasenbrock in his landmark essay, "J.L. Austin and the Articulation of a New Rhetoric," in College Composition and Communication 38 (1987). In this respect, speech-act theory provides a link between what are often considered two separate communities with separate pedagogies--literary scholars and composition instructors. In my own classroom, I have attempted to explore the pedagogical implications of speech-act theory for composition in a practical way, through situations that encourage students to remember their audiences. These implications I will discuss in this essay.

CS213258

Key to an attempt to reach an audience is the question phrased by Dasenbrock as follows: "What should I lead my audience to see about my subject?" (299) For Dasenbrock, Austin's discussion of "illocutionary and perlocutionary effects" is important because "it allows us to analyze every text's orientation towards affecting an audience" (298). Austin, in How to

BEST COPY AVAILABLE

Do Things with Words, distinguishes among locutionary, illocutionary, and perlocutionary acts. For Austin, the locutionary act is the act "of 'saying something.'"

> The act of "saying something" in this full normal sense I call, i.e. dub, the performance of a locutionary act, and the study of utterances thus far and in these respects the study of locutions, or of the full units of speech. (94)

The illocutionary act on the other hand is the "performance of an act in saying something" (Austin 99). Illocutionary acts include interrogation, warning, declaring a verdict, etc., and are treated as "forces" (Austin 98-99).

> I explained the performance of an act in this new and second sense as the performance of an "illocutionary" act, i.e. performance of an act in saying something as opposed to performance of an act of saying something; and I shall refer to the doctrine of the different types of function of language here in question as the doctrine of "illocutionary forces." (99)

The perlocutionary act involves the achievement "of certain effects by saying something" (Austin 120), as opposed to the locutionary act, which has "meaning," and the illocutionary act, which has a "force" (Austin 120).

> Thus we distinguished the locutionary act...which has a meaning; the illocutionary act which has a certain force in saying something; the perlocutionary act which is the achieving of certain effects by saying something. (Austin 120)

These various speech acts hint toward the writer's attempt to reach the audience by anticipating the response of that audience.

In the classroom, I have presented Austin's locutionary, illocutionary, and perlocutionary acts in terms of the following practical, easy-to-remember questions: 1) What am I saying? 2) Why am I saying it? 3) How am I affecting my audience, the reader? In considering their writing in terms of these three questions, student writers do not necessarily focus on manipulating their audiences as the Sophists were accused of training their pupils to do, but rather on enabling their readers to "see" (in Dasenbrock's words) what they want them to see (Dasenbrock 299). Through peer review of each other's essays, students learn to anticipate audience response as they obtain suggestions and criticism from other students. By commenting on the teacher's written responses to their essays, they not only confront the teacher's suggestions, but also inform the teacher how they respond to his or her comments. In classroom exercises such as writing letters to political figures on issues vital to them (e.g., staggering tuition increases at local city and state colleges) or op-ed pieces for the college newspaper, they learn to target their writing toward a particular audience. In these ways, speech-act theory is transformed into practice in the classroom.

In my freshman composition class at Baruch College in New York City, in Spring 1991, there were 25 students from a variety of ethnic and racial backgrounds. Students wrote three short essays and a longer research essay during the semester and took part in many in-class writing experiences. Each student brought a rough draft of the essay to class, and exchanged the draft with another student for peer review according to the following criteria:

1) What is the writer trying to say? Is the writer clear?
2) Where in the essay do you feel confused? Do you have any suggestions for improvement?

3) What impression does the writer create of himself or herself? Does the writer seem sincere, confused, angry, confident, etc.?

4) How do you feel about the essay? Do you feel angry, confused, informed, etc.?

5) What does the conclusion do?

In anticipating the responses of their peers, student writers learn to be sensitive to the need to communicate with an audience. During the course of the semester, I distributed a questionnaire asking as follows: "Has exchanging rough drafts with students helped you in your writing? If so, how? If not, why not?" Students in such a situation naturally considered the perlocutionary force of their replies in terms of the potential effect upon the reader--their teacher. In a sense, they could not be utterly frank in their writing. Utter frankness in communication, however, may represent simply a quixotic if not irrelevant ideal, for speech-act theory reminds us that all communication involves a relationship between speaker or writer and audience. In any case, it is interesting to note what students thought I wanted of them in terms of replies to the above question. Primarily, students felt that exchanging rough drafts helped them to improve their grammar and syntax as well as the organization of their essays. In other words, they concentrated on the locutionary ("What am I saying?") aspects of their writing in their reflections on the process of exchanging rough drafts. They also reported sharing insights that enhanced the clarity of their writing, and in this sense they learned to pay attention to the perlocutionary aspects of their writing ("How do I affect the reader?").

Ramon wrote, "I feel that exchanging rough drafts with other students has helped me write. The reason is that you get some feedback from an audience." Beatrice averred that because of peer exchange, English has become a more interesting subject for her. "English has never been my favorite subject, so it's kind of hard for me....While Ramon tells me what's wrong with my paper, Denise narrows it down. I feel comfortable afterwards and fix my paper." Yesenia noted that exchanging rough drafts helped her because other students "look over" her writing and "point out mistakes." She also observed, however, that the value of this exchange depended on the effort applied to reading the essay: "Someone might not want to read through it, and they'll just tell you it's okay." Deborah considered exchange of rough drafts to be helpful to her in terms of new insights on a conceptual level: "...the praises and criticisms I get help me to improve my writing. In addition, I sometimes gain new ideas, new insights, and new styles." HyungSook noted that exchanging rough drafts helped her both on the conceptual level and on the grammatical and syntactical levels. Other students' comments, she observed, "made me see my errors" and "gave me ideas to improve my papers." Richard was very much in favor of exchanging rough drafts because it helped him to develop his essay in terms of ideas and information: "It tells me I need more information or where I have mistakes. It tells me if I should add or delete things...." Rod observed that students offered "criticism you wouldn't normally expect from a teacher." Terrance also stressed the eye-opening aspects of peer exchange: "Yes, I feel that exchanging rough drafts has helped me in my writing. It has given me another point of view besides my own and has opened my eyes to new ideas."

These responses illustrate that peer review helps students to grow more sensitive to the need to communicate with an audience and to

anticipate its responses. It provides students with an audience of their peers--an audience apart from the authority figure of the teacher who assigns grades. Through peer review, students write for the sake of communicating with their peers, and not only for the sake of fulfilling course requirements. They learn to examine their writing more closely in terms of the three forces postulated by speech-act theory--locutionary, illocutionary, and perlocutionary--as they consider who their audience is, what they are writing, why they are writing, and how they are affecting their audience.

Through the teacher's comments, students learn to communicate with a particular audience which represents in a way the academic community, and to anticipate the response of that audience. The teacher's comments on students' essays involve a number of illocutionary forces--warning, persuasion, encouragement, etc.--which may evoke perlocutionary effects in the student perhaps not necessarily intended by the teacher. Throughout the term, I directed my written comments to students in order to persuade them to revise their essays (for a possibly higher grade) and to guide them as they do so. The illocutionary force of my comments resides, therefore, in a combination of persuasion and exhortation. The perlocutionary force of my comments resides, hopefully, in revisions or subsequent writing assignments that reveal improvement. Many students rewrote their essays; many did not. In any case, once during the course of the semester I distributed a questionnaire asking the students to respond to the following: "Have the teacher's comments been helpful to you in your writing? If so, how? If not, why not?" Through an opportunity to respond in class, in writing, to my comments, students not only confronted the implications of my comments for their own writing, but also informed the teacher what they thought of these

comments. To some extent, these responses were suspect in that students attempted to tell me in writing what they thought I wanted to hear. It is instructive, however, to note what students considered to be of importance to me as teacher.

Most students in their responses to my comments stressed the grammatical and syntactical implications of my comments for their writing. (I circle such errors and refer students to appropriate pages in a writing handbook. In my class, students can rewrite their essays for a higher grade; consequently, there is motivation for them to read the teacher's comments.) A few students, however, responded in writing to the organizational and developmental implications of my comments. In other words, their responses revolved around the locutionary force of their writing ("What am I saying?"), and the perlocutionary force of their writing in terms of clarity ("How do I affect the reader?"). Ismael noted that teachers' comments helped him both with the mechanical and with the organizational and developmental aspects of writing: "Having the teachers comment on the essay is really helpful, to me at least. You see, the teacher's comments allow you to clarify any disturbing or unclarified thoughts. Sometimes, they'll even comment on grammar and syntax. At least with the comments, I know which way my essay is going and if it's establishing its objective." According to Ricky, my comments were helpful both in terms of pointing out grammatical and syntactical errors and of indicating ways to improve his essay from a developmental and organizational perspective: "The teacher's comments have been helpful in many ways. One way is that the comments pinpoint my grammar errors and show where improvement should be made. Another way the comments are useful is that I can see where and how to improve my writing for a better grade next time."

Many of the Asian and Asian-American students, for whom English is a second language, focused on the grammatical and syntactical implications of my comments for their writing. Miranda, for example, considered my comments in terms of the revelation of her "mistakes": "I think the teacher's comments have been helpful in my writing. In the teacher's comments, I can see what my mistakes were and try to be more careful...so that hopefully I will not make the same mistake again." Cindy, another student of Asian background, likewise focussed on this aspect of my comments while appreciating my references to the handbook: "I think your comments are very helpful. I'll know what my mistakes are and how to correct them. I guess that my writing has improved. It's great that you tell me what to read in the Practical English Handbook, so I can correct my flaws." Frank felt that my comments enabled him to see "where I am going wrong," but he advocated in addition an "editing group": "I feel, however, that if we were to form an editing group, of about three to five people, we would turn in better papers because they would be proofread over and over." For the most part, students felt that my comments sensitized them to grammatical and syntactical aspects of their writing; some noted my comments on the developmental and organizational aspects of their writing.

At the end of the semester, students were asked to respond in writing to the following question: "On what criteria do you think the teacher's comments were based?" Students again revealed concerns for organization and development, and for grammar and syntax. Typical was the response of Deborah, who noted as follows: "The teacher's comments on my essay were 1) to keep the audience in mind, 2) check for grammar/syntax, 3) organization, 4) consistency." More succinct was Ramon's response to my comments: "They pointed out my errors." Perhaps the students were responding to what they

felt were difficulties in their own writing--difficulties of which my comments have made them aware. Or perhaps they were responding to what they perceived as the peculiar bias of their instructor, who also teaches a "remedial" writing course and whose prior experiences orient him toward concern for grammar and syntax. In any case, students carried out their revisions in a pragmatic way. Students were asked, for example, to respond in writing to another question at the end of the semester: "What effects did you hope to achieve by responding to the teacher's comments on your essay?" "A higher grade," wrote Rod.

Students in my class wrote letters to the editor of the college newspaper (The Ticker), op-ed pieces for the same publication, and letters to local legislators on issues of vital concern to them (e.g., a proposed tuition hike). Subsequent to these writing experiences, I asked students to respond to the following question: "What did you learn from writing letters to State Assemblymen or op-eds for the college newspaper, in terms of trying to to reach an audience?" From their responses, it appears that students learned to target their audiences in four ways: 1) distinguishing among audiences ("Who is my audience?"), 2) concentrating on organization of thoughts and clarity of expression ("What am I saying?"), 3) noting the need for persuasiveness ("Why am I saying it?"), 4) considering the emotional effects of their writing on the reader ("How does it affect my audience, the reader?"). The latter three questions represent practical applications of Austin's locutionary, illocutionary, and perlocutionary acts, respectively.

1) Students learned to distinguish among audiences ("Who is my audience?"). Terrance wrote that in composing letters to State Assemblymen and writing op-ed pieces, he has learned "to write for the audience you're trying to reach." He noted that letters to officials must be "professional"

in tone. "For example, you can't write your Congressman and illustrate your point in slang. You must be as professional as possible without losing the strength of your message. But if you're writing for The Ticker, you can relax. You can write in a more relaxed or colloquial tone because you're writing to your peers."

2) Students learned to concentrate on organization of thoughts and on clarity of expression ("What am I saying?"). Deborah saw the need for organization as she targeted her writing to an audience: "In addition, from writing to people, I was able to grasp 'organization' in writing. It is important that in order to reach an audience, one must organize his or her thoughts clearly to avoid confusion..." Concentration on clarity of expression implies care for correct grammar and syntax. Richard came to the following conclusion after writing letters to officials: "I know that if you write well and formally enough, the person who receives your writing will take you seriously. If you write sloppily...he or she will just crumble up the paper and put it in the garbage."

3) Students noted the need for persuasiveness ("Why do I write?"). Cindy observed that in writing op-eds or letters to officials, persuasiveness is the "key": "I learned that in order to reach an audience, I have to know what I'm aiming to discuss. Based on the op-eds and the letters to the Assemblyman, being able to persuade is the main key." For Natalie, persuasiveness called for proper diction: "I learned that in order to reach an audience, I have to use words that are effective and powerful..."

4) Students learned to consider the emotional effects of their writing on their audience, the reader ("How does it affect my audience, the reader?"). Yasemin felt the need to arouse fear in her audience, a

government official, over an issue of vital concern to her (e.g., a proposed tuition hike): "I got the impression that in order to get the audience's attention you have to speak harshly and try to bring out the fear of the people..." Frank took the opposite tack: "I learned that [in] trying to grasp a person's attention, [one] must concentrate more on persuading somebody into agreeing with your feeling instead of using harsh words and thoughts."

Speech-act theory, in its emphasis on the writer's attempt to reach an audience, has much potential in the composition classroom. In this essay, I have elaborated upon several applications of speech-act theory, including peer review, responses to the teacher's comments on written essays, and letters to government officials and to editors of the college newspaper on issues of vital importance to students. Through these practices, students forgetful of their audiences learn to target their writing to certain readers and to anticipate readers' responses. They learn to approach their writing from four perspectives: 1) Who is my audience? 2) What am I saying? 3) Why am I saying it? 4) How does it affect my audience, the reader? In attempting to reach an audience with these four questions in mind, students realize the practical implications of speech-act theory.

WORKS CITED

Abrams, M.H. A Glossary of Literary Terms. 5th Edition. Fort Worth, Texas: Holt, Rinehart and Winston, Inc., 1988.

Austin, John. How to Do Things With Words. Cambridge, Massachusetts: Harvard University Press, 1962.

Dasenbrock, Reed Way. "J.L. Austin and the Articulation of a New Rhetoric." College Composition and Communication 38 (1987): 291-305.

Watkins, Floyd C., and William B. Dillingham. Practical English Handbook. Boston, Massachusetts: Houghton Mifflin Company, 1989.